

bone



Author of **THE TERRIBLE**

YRSA DALEY-WARD

Foreword by Kiese Laymon

"Yrsa's work is like holding the truth in your hands. It sweats and breathes before you. A glorious living thing." —FLORENCE WELCH

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"it is what it is" and "some kind of man" first appeared in
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because writing is a soft and a hard place,
all at once.

to the elders	129
history	130
untitled 1	132
poetry	133
wine	135
another thing that happened	136
untitled 2	139
dankyes (Mwaghavul)	140
<i>acknowledgments</i>	141

foreword

but that

When I was eleven years old, I was sent to stay with Grandmama in Forest, Mississippi, for the third time because Mama didn't know what to do with me. After church, Grandmama told me to write a response, no doubt Jesus-fearing, to what she called the "Book of Poetry" in the Bible. The "Book of Poetry" was really the Book of Psalms, specifically Psalms 23:5.

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

"Dear Grandmama," I wrote, "I do not know who 'you' is in this poem or why they would prepare a table for me if my enemies were watching when they know good and well that enemies will eat all the food off your table. I do not know why they want my head to be greasy or my cup to overflow on your carpet either unless they want me to get a whupping. But that last line does sound good compared to the whole poem."

Grandmama told me that my breakdown of the "Book of Poetry" was shameful, but she encouraged me that day to write my own poems. I filled long yellow legal pads with boastful verses about my how my adolescent fatness was the new fineness and girls who didn't recognize the new "fineness" must have been an old kind of "mindless." I started trying to

write my own version of love poetry to the same imaginary mindless young woman.

But three years later, I found and obsessed over the brilliance of subject-verb disagreements in the fortunes of fortune cookies. Four years later, I found and obsessed over the "wait a minute" truths of horoscopes. Six years later, I found and obsessed over the sustained jerky exploration of the essay. Eight years later, I found and obsessed over the importance of dramatic irony in unreliably narrated short stories. Ten years later, I found and obsessed over the magic of multiple narrative threads in the novel.

Thirty years later, I was given *bone*.

But that.

bone works forward and backward, alerting me of yesterday and reminding me of tomorrow. *bone* is the fortune, horoscope, essay, short story, and novel we all want to write, and all hope to have written to us. At the end of the piece "Poetry," Yrsa Daley-Ward writes,

The bruising will shatter.
The bruising will shatter into
black diamond.
No one will sit beside you in class.
Maybe your life will work.
Most likely it won't at first
but that
will give you poetry.

By the time *bone* was given to me, I'd written ten thousand sentences, hundreds of thousands of words, two books, three unpublished manuscripts, but somehow, some way, I'd forgotten that all along I'd been given poetry thirty years earlier.

I'd been given poetry at twelve when Grandmama read my poem about my experiences with sexual abuse. When I got off my knees praying with her that night, I watched the back of Grandmama's sixty-one-year-old body heave in, pause, and heave out. When I finally placed my thumb lightly on the small of Grandmama's back, and she jerked forward and clenched the covers tighter around her body, she gave me poetry.

But that.

I'd been given poetry at sixteen when all I could think to do was steal all the wheat bread, white bread, cinnamon rolls, pitas, and hot dog buns from the bread truck after the Rodney King verdict.

But that.

I'd been given poetry at seventeen when I heard Mama tell someone on the other end of the phone that being alive was harder than she thought.

But that.

I was given poetry when I'd starved and run myself from a 319-pound heavy black boy to a 161-pound skinny black man. But that heart, and those bones, were the same. Poetry was lodged in the memory, and the memory was lodged in the bone.

Yrsa Daley-Ward makes all of us, and all of our different sensibilities, know that bruises give you poetry, and we give

you poetry, and you give we poetry, and loveliness gives you
poetry, and first days give you poetry, and warnings give you
poetry, and emergencies give you poetry, and bones, bones
have no choice but to give us poetry.

The trick is to accept what's offered.

Kiese Laymon
June 2017

bone

intro

I am the tall dark stranger
those warnings prepared you for.

emergency warning

You are one of those people, it is clear, who needs help. I think you should stop speaking in a low attractive voice whenever you call. Stop making me think of velvet and fragrant tobacco and that first sip of bourbon. Stop inciting stirrings, movements between us, little rebellions, causing chaos in all of my darker places. The top half of my body is at gross political warfare with the lower. One part of me is roaring and the other wholly disapproves. You are a beautiful danger. Do not force me to open up. Some books are bound tightly for years for reasons. Some books are burned for their own good, Love. Stop wearing clothes the way that you do. Don't allow them to cling to your body like that. Do not follow these effortless fashions where everything looks just so, because, really . . . who could resist such a thing? The Lord knows you are beautiful and unfair. I think perhaps

you should spare a thought, dear, for those who are sick over you, burning up with you, damp with you. You know what you do. You're a slow fever. Don't be so very engaging, amusing or witty or bright. You are causing confusion and jams in tight spaces. You are an accident in waiting. The type of accident with casualties spanning from me to you and here to there, a potential tragedy, a stunning unborn disaster. Should I touch you, I will suffer and you will suffer and she will suffer. You are a danger zone. I must not enter. I should not enter. But I might.

liking things

Women who were brought up devout
and fearful
get stirred, like anyone else.
Want men. Want
other women. Stink under the arms at the end of
the day.
Get that all too familiar mix of fear and discontent
in the night. Want to do the things
that they Must Not Do.
Those dirty, bloody attractive things.

a fine art

You may have learned from your
mother or any other hunted woman.
Smiling at devils is a useful,
learned thing.
Swallowing discomfort down in
spades
holding it tight in your belly.
Aging on the inside only.
Keeping it forever sexy.

bone

From One
who says, "Don't cry.
You'll like it after a while."

And Two who tells you thank you
after the fact and can't look at your face.

To Three who pays for your breakfast
and a cab home
and your mother's rent.

To Four
who says,
"But you felt so good
I didn't know how to stop."

To Five who says giving your body
is tough
but something you do very well.

To Six
Who smells of tobacco
and says, "Come on, I can feel that
you love this."

To those who feel bad in the morning
yes,

some feel bad in the morning

and sometimes they tell you
you want it
and sometimes you think that you do.

Thank heavens you're resetting
ever
setting and
resetting.

How else do you sew up the tears?

How else can the body survive?

this was the story

This was the story according to her, but then she could never be trusted. It was safe to say that we had established this by now. We had established this on a very regular basis.

On this particular morning, her story and its various possibilities did corroborate with stories she had told before, but everything else was out of sorts.

We were drinking whisky on two stools by the window.

It was freezing cold and the moon was a tiny slip of a thing in the sky.

She had woken me up for school far too early or far too late again. Also, we were trying to avoid the view.

She was house-proud but not at all garden-proud and the garden was an embarrassment, even at the wrong, pitch-black time of day.

Now she was saying that she met my father somewhere on a large boat. She was working on the Gold Leaf Cruise liner in nineteen eighty-four. The way she put it, I could be the child of one of four, possibly five, but the fifth was not likely due to timing and the fact that they were interrupted before the Point of No Return.

However, as she put it
(and never tactfully enough)
accidents do happen.

So here were the four, plus the very slim possibility.

1. The Captain's mate
2. The dark-skinned man behind the bar, or
3. his friend, or
4. his other friend . . . owing to the fact that it had been a crazy night in the middle of a set of six lost, crazy months and she was
 - a) going through a great deal. Heartbreak, namely
 - b) drinking far too much far too often.

Furthermore, she did not subscribe to the theory of regretting anything. If she did, she might regret not having more control over the situation. Also, most cases like this won't stand up in court.

5. (Least likely)
The One she loved.

I felt that I should get up (although you couldn't stand up to your full height in our house—do I call it a house?)

and make a point about going to school, because she was likely to forget.

"Anyway," she went on. "This fettered concept of motherhood is outdated. You can go and come back and go and come back and I shall always be here. I shall always be here. That is real Love for you, and don't let anyone tell you any different."

Then she began to speak in a different language. Her lover was fast asleep in the bed, too far gone to move. He had been sick on the pillow and was drawing some very unsettling snores but as always she was in her own space, not hearing.

She rested her head on the table and disappeared, as usual.

I put on my coat, looked over them both and left for school, or something like it.

When I came back, our house was gone.
Sometimes exactly what you want not to happen happens anyway.

battle

Loving someone who hates
themselves
is a special kind of violence.
A fight inside the bones.
A war within the blood.

when it is but it ain't

Some of us love badly. Sometimes the love is the
type of love that implodes. Folds in on itself. Eats
its insides. Turns wine to poison. Behaves poorly
in restaurants. Drinks. Kisses other people. Comes
back to your bed at four a.m. smelling like everything
outside. Asks about your ex. Is jealous of your ex.
Thinks everyone a rival. Some of us love others
badly, love ourselves worse. Some of us love horrid,
love beastly, love sick, love anti light. Sometimes the
love can't go home at night, can't sleep with itself,
cannot contain itself, catches fire, destroys the belly,
strips buildings, goes missing. Punches. Smashes
heirlooms. Tells lies. The best lies. Fucks around.
Writes poems, impresses people. Chases lovers into
corners. Leaves them longing. Seasick. Says yes.
Means anything but. Tricks the body. Kills the body.
Dances wild
and walks away, smiling.

skill

I am my own father
but that wasn't always clear.
I had to learn my duties, fast.
It wasn't easy.

I got some lines on my face
I got a battle with the booze.
I look prettier than I am,
but there's a talent to that.

you don't know the half of it

According to you,
people like me
shouldn't go into places like this or
be around people like these
but you don't know the half of it.
The brightest of stars, frankly,
are just a load of hot air and
diamonds, sadly,
were just formed from dust and rock
and the butterfly,
remember,
used to crawl on its belly
and tiny legs
through the dirt.

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secret

It has been going on like this
for years. I provide the bed
and all of my body.
She provides the drink,
foots all of the bill.

community

They say women are gentler, treat
each other better.
Please.
As if we never learned to eroticize our
rage,
to block out the screaming of the gut.

the not quite love

I haven't been home in nearly two weeks.
My new lover has a fridge full of beer
and can almost make jollof rice
also the sex is good
and we are falling into something we
will soon mistake for love

anyway,
"home" is a problem. There are the
bills and there
are the mice
plus
there is that feeling you get
when you catch up with yourself.

lesson

The difference between attraction
and compatibility

how it kicks you in the belly every
now and then.

artichokes

Until you have been the last ones
sitting in the café on the corner and
she has kissed the dark rum from the
rim of your glass and schooled you in
the art of eating artichokes

until then,
you are not yet woman.

Until you put soft leaf to lip
touch tongue to flesh,
bite the lobe,
swallow the juice
she says will purify you
until you open it up, sigh at the color,
see its very middle and learn what
fingers are best at

until you reach further still
into that thick, hot heart
life has not yet started.

Before you had been promised.
Before she is a liar.
Before you are dismantled, fixed and
broke again you are not yet a lover.

Remember on the right night and
under the right light
any idea can seem like a good one
and love
love is mostly ill-advised but always
brave.

The most important thing to do is
not to worry. The lines on your face
will never stop the sun from coming
up. Your tears cannot affect the
weather. There are wars going on.
The one in your body is the only one
you can be sure of losing
or winning, then losing again.

You drink more water than rum these
days, don't you?
But you drink to her memory, don't
you?
And you only take artichokes in salad.
Never whole.
Not in a café on a dusky street at
midnight.
Not with her.
Never with her, or anyone like her.

heat

I miss you in tiny earthquakes
in little underground explosions
my soil is a hot disaster
Home is burning.
You're a lost thing.

relief

Thank Goodness I have nearly
unlearned
folding my desire into itself
being afraid to claim it.

the good work

I was raised pulling food
out of earth. I know where
joy comes from
and how to make it.

a test—things our bodies have been

A bargaining tool
Breakfast
Confused
Developed (over)
Expensive
Fun
Ghost
Health
Igloo . . .
(Joke.)
Kissed
Lover
Mine?
Not
Offering
Pricey
Quiet, queer
Reward
Supple.
Tempting.
Undone.
Very.
Weapon
XXX
Yours (or that's what we told you).
Zest.

girls

Chinazo's married boyfriend
wants all of her friends and it isn't
as though she doesn't know it.

Oh well, she says, men will always
want to play around. He likes you.
Thinks you're sexy. How about it?

I say
it isn't my thing. She
starts laying into me,
asking me who I think I am
how can I act so high and mighty

when *everyone* knows what I am.
Everyone knows it.

I see her fixed on nails/her brittle
life/her plastic hair/her stretched-out
love/her painted lips/her bleach-red
skin

and cry a little
all the way home.

sthandwa sami (my beloved, isiZulu)

In the early hours of this morning it
was far too hot for anyone to sleep.
You told me I was strange and kissed
me
sunk your teeth into my soft bottom
lip, twice. So hard I thought you drew
blood.

I keep getting the feeling that if you
look at me for long enough
you may see that I have a thousand
fears
just like your mother who never really
wanted you to leave
meanwhile *mina* I am catching up on
the sleep that we missed
and waiting patiently to feel normal
again.

My thoughts about you are
frightening but precise.
I can see the house on the hill where
we grow our own vegetables out back
and drink warm wine out of jam jars
and sing songs in the kitchen until the
sun comes up

wena

you make me feel like myself

again. Myself before I had any solid
reasons to be anything else.
Last night you gave me space to
dream bigger than the single bed.
You laughed in your sleep and I cried
in mine
and this afternoon we might be tired
because the sun is fierce today
and so much happened between
midnight and now
but *Bhabha* you are terror and
brilliance

so

I am the kind of woman who is
already teaching my body to miss
yours
without craving.

I am the type of woman who is
already teaching my heart to miss
yours
without failing
and I am quite sure that you will find
this unnecessary
but I am already searching for a place
to run to and hide when you say,

Uthando lwami. I'm ready. Are you?

You know that I would gladly drive
with you to the other side of the

world with only the clothes I am
wearing
and the loose change
and empty peanut shells in my purse
kodwa
every time you leave the room I
worry
and think that perhaps I have
imagined you
and maybe you have imagined me.

she puts cinnamon on tomatoes

You knew you liked her when
she was talking about her life one day
and in the street the drunk women
were fighting
and the young men were playing
house music
and there were Muslims praying
amidst all this
and the taxis were honking their
horns all around her in a circle of
chaos

so she went back inside in all her
calm

and where the two of you are now, in
a different town
and different time, there are dogs
barking outside
and you love the way
her name feels behind your mouth.

She puts cinnamon on tomatoes
white pepper on carrots
mustard seeds on unlikely things
and takes wine and ice with breakfast.

She sits awake at night
and dreams with open eyes
so you are not afraid to tell her
every time you want to run.

There was a time when fingers on
white walls made you nervous
a time when you didn't pray so much
a time when you worried about what
the men in the street had to say

a time when you weren't yourself
they tell you you're an abomination to
God
how so? You speak to God more
often now
than ever before.

She sketches jellyfish
and planets
smokes a broken white pipe
and you feel like an instrument
that she's had for years.

You pool pennies together
for dinner, most nights
but you're happy.
You are. You're happy.

I'll admit it, I'm drawn to the wolves

I like the lines you use on me
they crackle a little, like magic.

I cannot pull my mind off you
even though
I do not trust your hands.

there will always be your heart

Do not shout for silence
do not shout too loud
there will always be birds outside a closed
window
a car door shutting in the next street
fine raindrops,
whispers
footsteps in puddles
some couple somewhere
having an argument
he's telling her to shut up
she's crying
threatening to leave
he's saying he doesn't give a fuck.
Do not shout for silence
do not shout too loud
there will always be
loose change spilled on a pavement
a plastic bag dancing somewhere in the
wind,
a tree stretching when it thinks no one is
there.

There will always be everything that you
mean but do not say
when I ask you what I've done to make

you so angry
and the look you give me when I've
said too much in front of our friends.

Do not go too far for peace and quiet
do not run too far
because the country can be as loud as the city
too noisy in its stillness
and anyway,
there will always be your breath
which, hard as you try,
you can't do without
you can't run away from.
There will always be your heart
beating
stronger and louder
the harder, the further
you run.

legacy

Being married was hard on my throat,
said he.

Being held
was tight round my neck.
Look, I still bear the marks,
said he.

Listen, I still can't breathe.

I've been owned for centuries,
said he.

It is love. But I will not stay.

My father
was a long dark fairy tale too.

It is and
it will be that way.

it is what it is

I saw Dad for the last time one hour and forty-seven minutes ago, when I took one final look at the body in the open casket. His complexion was dull. It looked just like him. Grayed hair, broad nose, black lips. His expression solemn, as it was in life. He never smiled at us.

The church deaconess was in my ear, going on and on about how good he always looked in a trilby, asking what would become of his collection, especially the navy one with the pink felt ribbon. I promised to be sure to contact her and agreed that the church was a great place for charity to begin. She wanted to know what I was going to do with his good winter coat and green cashmere sweater. Mentioned that her son and my father probably wore the same size.

Mrs. Harrison has always been tactless. Ever since I was little she has gotten away with it because she is one of the elder members of the church.

When Lemar Campbell died of a brain tumor, Mrs. Harrison asked Lemar's mother right at the graveside for his walking stick. Just as they were singing "Shall We Gather at the River" and sprinkling the first shovel of dry earth onto the casket. It had been a beautiful, very ornate walking stick with a gold handle and tip, but still.

I am tired all the time lately, but am not sleeping. When I do, I have strange dreams in which neither of my parents are dead and they are both shouting over each other, pleading with me, trying to make amends.

"One at a time," I say to them, feigning exasperation, but secretly glad of the attention.

"Calm down, both of you. One at a time."

This. This is what happened. I still can't believe it but it is what it is.

The sermon drew to a close. The final hymn was sung and the minister urged us all to give our

hearts to Jesus. We said a prayer and a stream of people were filing towards the front to pay their last respects to my father when Levy goes over and spits in the coffin. Then turns and walks straight out of church, straight down the middle aisle, casual as anything. I ran out after Levy. He was my ride back to London and there was nothing else I could do for my father anyway.

We sped off outside the church in his white BMW. We didn't speak.

We are on our way back to London. For some reason, I keep thinking back to the time when Dad kicked us out. Two days later, Mum found a cheap flat up North for us to stay in. It was mid-March and just after my sixth birthday. Levy and I discovered that we had mice in the kitchen. Actually they were rats, but it was nicer for us to pretend they were mice.)

Soon after that, we became aware of a ripe, sickly smell around the place and we were taken away from our mum six months later. My brother

was to go and live with our uncle Terry in South East London and I was to live with my Great Aunt Delle in St. Anne's, Lancashire. No one told us anything further than that.

When Levy and I were separated I didn't know what to do with myself. He was at a different school now and he'd started to speak differently on the phone. He told me he had a Nike logo cut into his hair and one ear pierced. He said he had a lot of friends.

I didn't have much in the way of friends and I missed him terribly. Aunt Delle never allowed me to go anywhere after school. We went to church on a Saturday. I couldn't go to sleepovers and had never been to the cinema (Aunt Delle believes that picture houses are an abomination). I learned to quote the Bible inside out. Sometimes children from school would be shopping with their parents on a Saturday and see all of us from church singing in the market square and trying to convert passersby. People laughed at us when we tried to tell them the Good News or hand out tracts about the second coming of Jesus.

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It sounded as though Levy was having lots of fun in London. I tried my best to match him with made-up stories of what I was up to in Lancashire, besides eating rice and peas every night and reading the Bible out loud while Aunt Delle nodded off by the fire. Once I told him that Aunt Delle had slipped in the bath and almost broke her back and I had put her in the recovery position and alerted the authorities and was going to receive a medal the following Sunday at the Town Hall. Levy was impressed but Uncle called back, asking questions. When I was found out I got a good beating and was made to read the Bible upstairs all week and do chores. I was thoroughly miserable at the idea that my brother would think me a fraud.

The next time he called, I had been crying, because I had lost my Bible and Aunt Delle told me that I would never get to heaven if I continued to be so messy. Levy made me feel better by explaining that lost items were all due to crazy science, so it

couldn't have ever been avoided.

"It's all about entropy," he explained.

"The more energy something has, the higher the entropy—entropy being a thermodynamical function of state, you understand."

At the other end of the phone I nodded, not really getting it.

"You see," he continued, "as long as the things in your room have energy, they will always descend into chaos.

The only way to get rid of entropy is to reduce the temperature to absolute zero . . . two hundred and seventy-three degrees below freezing."

I tried explaining the theory to Aunt Delle, who hated anything scientific.

She pulled me out of Sunday school right away and made me go into Big Peoples Church, with all the adults. If

I was old enough to understand that nonsense, she said, I was old enough to lead prayers and do scripture readings.

Meanwhile I started to leave my bedroom windows open, even during the winter. Of course there was no chance of reducing the temperature to absolute zero, but I thought that

It sounded as though Levy was having lots of fun in London. I tried my best to match him with made-up stories of what I was up to in Lancashire, besides eating rice and peas every night and reading the Bible out loud while Aunt Delle nodded off by the fire. Once I told him that Aunt Delle had slipped in the bath and almost broke her back and I had put her in the recovery position and alerted the authorities and was going to receive a medal the following Sunday at the Town Hall. Levy was impressed but Uncle called back, asking questions. When I was found out I got a good beating and was made to read the Bible upstairs all week and do chores. I was thoroughly miserable at the idea that my brother would think me a fraud.

The next time he called, I had been crying, because I had lost my Bible and Aunt Delle told me that I would never get to heaven if I continued to be so messy. Levy made me feel better by explaining that lost items were all due to crazy science, so it

couldn't have ever been avoided.

"It's all about entropy," he explained.

"The more energy something has, the higher the entropy—entropy being a thermodynamical function of state, you understand."

At the other end of the phone I nodded, not really getting it.

"You see," he continued, "as long as the things in your room have energy, they will always descend into chaos. The only way to get rid of entropy is to reduce the temperature to absolute zero . . . two hundred and seventy-three degrees below freezing."

I tried explaining the theory to Aunt Delle, who hated anything scientific.

She pulled me out of Sunday school right away and made me go into Big Peoples Church, with all the adults. If I was old enough to understand that nonsense, she said, I was old enough to lead prayers and do scripture readings.

Meanwhile I started to leave my bedroom windows open, even during the winter. Of course there was no chance of reducing the temperature to absolute zero, but I thought that

lowering it might help.

It worked. Months later, the Bible turned up at the bottom of the wash basket.

Aunt Delle said that I was much luckier than my brother because he hardly ever saw Mum anymore and she prayed that Levy would not turn out like our Uncle Terry, who loved money and white women too much and that although he was a great financial help, still needed to save his soul.

In those days, Mum was getting very thin but was still pretty. She wore stonewash jeans and a tracksuit top and her curly perm smelled like the hairdressers. She would come over on a Sunday every once in a while. Her and Aunt Delle would shut the kitchen door and talk. Then we would have tea and Aunt Delle would get out the fruitcake.

I loved those Sundays more than anything. Mum didn't always come when she said she would. But when she did, they were my most favorite days ever.

Mum eventually took up with

Washington, a rude, foul drunk with body odor. He might really have been quite attractive, only he had no front teeth. That was why he was known as Washington. He would have been even more handsome than Denzel with good dentistry and sober habits.

Aunt Delle never liked my father but she came to the funeral anyway, wearing her best hat. I feel bad about not seeing her enough. She still lives alone, but she has home help. I don't phone as often as I should. You know how life is. We were round at hers last night, Levy and I, staying overnight before the funeral. I hadn't been back there for a few years. We ate snapper fish and dumplings off the old willow-patterned crockery. She didn't get the good Royal Wedding plates out for us but she did heat up some apple crumble in the oven. Nothing much had changed in the house apart from the old TV, which had been replaced by some newer model. It looked out of place in the house, shiny and black and new. She's getting very old. I know

the time will come when I'll phone
and she won't be there. So I try to
call out of duty every four weeks.

We are losing power.

Levy is pulling over towards the hard
shoulder. I am anxious. I want to get
back down south. The north is
unsettling, all deafening silences and
stressful boredom. There are not
nearly enough distractions and it can
all get too bloody silent, which leaves
room for dangerous things, like
thinking.

I ask Levy what is wrong with the car
and he says that there is nothing
wrong. He just doesn't feel right.
He has stopped on the hard shoulder
and I'm worried. I hope he isn't going
to have a heart attack or a
breakdown. A sane person doesn't go
around spitting in dead people's
coffins. So I ask if he feels breathless
or faint or anything.

He says,

"No, it is just a big feeling. One of
those crazy backed up against the wall
feelings, where every position hurts."

He says he's had them a lot lately.
Feelings like now there is no one left,
besides each other and Aunt Delle.
But she is old and she has Jesus. And
we've been too busy for Jesus lately.

"That big feeling you're talking
about," I say. "I think it's grief. Loss."
I tell him that it's just his mind's way
of coping, but really I have no idea
about his insides. If I did, I would be
able to work out why he only calls
twice a year.

He coughs and asks me if I've cried
since I heard the news. I tell him I
haven't cried about anything since
Mum died. I feel slightly
uncomfortable that my big brother is
getting so deep, to tell you the truth.
It would be too strange for him to
start now.

Levy says sorry for leaving. I know he
is talking about just now, about
leaving me alone in the church like
that, but I wish that he were talking
about when I was six and lost him.
He mumbles something about having
to get back to London and looks like
he is going to start up the ignition
again which is a good idea because it's
dangerous and illegal, isn't it, to be
parked up here like this?

He looks older than thirty.
I know it is going to be some time
before I speak to him again
and I know it shouldn't be like this
but it is what it is.
God, we really should get going. Here
we are, both busy people, still sitting
here in the car on the hard shoulder.
Staring out of the front window,
not crying our eyes out.

panacea

You told me I seemed haunted.
It was three a.m. and you could still smell
the storm clouds under my skin.
You can't quell depression by making
love.
But we tried.
But we tried,
oh, we did.

mental health

If you're walking down an aisle with a
dim, fluorescent hue
by the tinned fish and canned beans
strip lighting above, cracked tiles
beneath
with the realization that most things
are futile
and get the sudden urge to end it all
don't stop. Call a friend.
Call your mother if you have one
and, if you can stand her,
listen to her talk about the price of
canned fish and tinned beans.
Call the speaking clock. Know that
whatever time it says is the time that
everything has to change.
Leave the damn aisle.
Don't go anywhere where they sell
sweets, chips, booze,
fast love or lottery tickets.

See that just outside there are people-
lined streets that are emptier than
your insides,
skies darker than your own.
Look for yourself, because it never
helps to hear from anyone else.

If you are one of those "running
around town like mad" people,
people who jump from tall buildings,
buildings with glass fronts and not enough
air

if you are failing to fix a broken story
if you have been cooped up for far
too long in a very high tower in a
dangerously low state
plenty of TV channels and TV
dinners. Plenty of biscuits, chocolate
desserts, cake and plenty of wine but
no love for miles and miles

if you did not get up for work today
if it has been afternoon for hours
and the silence is keeping you awake,
if you only remember how to draw
your breath in and out like waves of
thick tar cooling,
if you are wishing it later,
pulling the sun down with your
prayers, leave the damn bed.
Wash the damn walls. Crack open a
window
even in the rain. Even in the snow.

Listen to the church bells outside.
Know that however many times they
chime is half the number of changes
you have to make.

Stop trying to die. Serve your time
here.
Do your time.

Clean out the fridge.
Throw away the soya milk. Soya milk
is made from children's tears. Put
flowers on the table. Stand them in a
measuring jug. Chop raw vegetables if
you have them.
Know that if you are hungry for
something but you can't think what
you are, more often than not, only
love-thirsty
only bored.

When the blood in your body is
weary to flow,
when your bones are heavy though
hollow
if you have made it past thirty
celebrate
and if you haven't yet,
rejoice. Know that there is a time
coming in your life when dirt settles
and the patterns form a picture.

If you dream of the city but you live
in the country
milk the damn cows.
Sell the damn sheep.

Know that they will be wishing you
well
posing for pictures on milk cartons or
running over lush hills to be counted
at the beginning of somebody else's
dream.
See, they never held you back.
It was you, only you.

nose

In all theories,
I have written you out of my memory.
Still, the middle of my face
refuses to be told.

I'm undone. Perhaps it is the breeze in my head.
Three years. And I did too much work on our love.
Three years
and I can't undo the problem of your scent.

It is a horrid and complicated fact. My fifth sense
an ambush. I walk by a bakery, chip shop, flower
stall, shopping center,
leather goods store

all the mornings in Lancashire still smell like you.
Last week I was caught in a storm overseas. When
the rain smell drove me silly
all I could feel were your hands.

Now home, I light the stove. I cook new food these
days
from recipe books. Now that you're gone I can fry
meat.
I buy a perfume I know you hate
and spray it on your side of the bed.

Still
you greet me in waves I cannot decipher.
Last night I smelled you in a dream. It is a
thumbprint now but I can't forget the loss.

I dreamed you beautiful.
You are
nothing beautiful. But
three years
and I can't clean you off my skin.

issue

I have searched hard for my very
dead parents in women with my
father's stature and men with my
mother's features
almost unwittingly
hardly successfully.

I like the sounds
our bodies make
when they fall in like.

I love the word *love*,
I do
but only far from home.

what is now will soon be past

Just because you do it
doesn't mean you always will.
Whether you're dancing dust
or breathing light
you're never exactly the same,
twice.